



Gaia, "St. John" (2010)

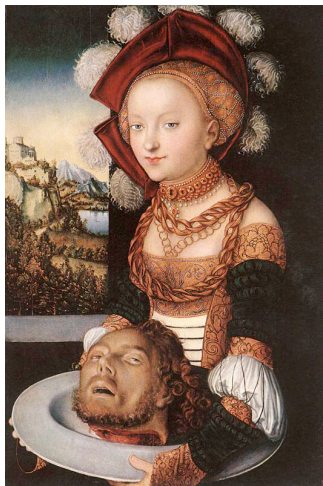
Natural Apparition

There is nothing more universal than nature, but the meaning of what constitutes the term may lead to disagreement. That perceptual ambiguity attracts Gaia, who navigates the boundary between nature and artifice carefully and with apparent ease. His latest artistic mash-up in Baltimore's Reservoir Hill neighborhood, combines the myths of the Christian saint St. John the Baptist, the Babylonian general Holofernes, and a cock.



Titled “St. John” (2010), the figural image is drawn and printed on two tones of newsprint. Gaia's latest work continues his interest in animal imagery. Judging by his past work, the depiction of animals in the city seems to represent the feeling of isolation and dislocation while serving as a doppelgänger for the street artist as a lone wolf or cocky

creator who brazenly uses the street as a canvas. The robed figure cradles the head of Holofernes, as depicted by the Italian Baroque painter Caravaggio in his masterpiece “Judith Beheading Holofernes” (1598-99) [*pictured here*]. The Babylonian maintains the same shocked expression but his head is turned 180 degrees yet the eyes, like the original source, continue to look upward. In “St. John,” we are left to assume that the head’s reaction is the result of finding that from the neck up he has been replaced by a rooster. The head is cradled with gentleness and care, neither of which are emotions we usually associate with the tortured Holofernes, who is often depicted as a victim of bloody violence. In Biblical legend, the story of Judith represents the triumph of the Israelites over the powerful empire of Babylon. Here, there is no written source to illuminate its meaning.



While the obvious reference is to Judith and Holofernes, the image also evokes the myth of Salome, daughter of the ancient Roman governor of Palestine, Herodias, who reputedly demanded the head of John the Baptist after he refused her sexual advances. She traditionally appears in literature, opera and art, as a symbol of lust, female seduction, and folly. In Gaia’s composition, the arms of the figure frame the disembodied head much like a platter frames St. John the Baptist’s disembodied head in many works of Western art, including Lucas Cranach’s “Salome” (c. 1530) [*pictured here*].

“St. John” appears like an urban apparition ... lonely, singular, and possibly lost as he wanders the streets. It is scaled larger than life like a figure on a billboard that remains even after its backdrop has long faded away. Scholarly research suggests that Caravaggio’s painting, which Gaia directly quotes from, may allude to two

infamous executions during his time, including the tragedy of Beatrice Cenci. After being beheaded by a corrupt Catholic system uninterested in justice, Cenci, who was terrorized by a tyrannical father, who she eventually plotted to murder, became a Roman symbol of resistance against the prevailing authorities. Cenci's legend grew after her martyrdom, and it is said that every year on the night before her death she returns to the bridge where she was executed carrying her severed head.

Yet, Gaia's figure is clearly masculine, with no trace of the feminine, even though he clearly uses imagery most often associated with female domination and male submission. The rooster, in particular, is an animal with many symbolic associations in our culture, including the double meaning of its other name, cock, its association with cockfighting, and the romantic image of a crowing animal that is quick to mark its territory and authority. Gaia's figure has no feet and the image begins, roughly under the knees. It appears to rise from the ground.

Open Metaphors

In the street, all images are multi-faceted, dependent on the viewer to unpack its meaning and its environment to frame any intended or communicated meaning. The interaction of man and animal is a narrative that appears again and again in Gaia's art. Like in "St. John," components are often mixed in uncommon configurations, like a mythical satyr or centaur. But in this case, the work's clearly Christian title highlights the story of the forerunner of Jesus Christ, the Christian son of God. According to Christian legend, John the Baptist attempted to bring to the people of Palestine knowledge that they were unprepared to hear. Is there something that Gaia's figure is eager to say that we are unwilling to hear?

An important component of this piece and all great street art is time, which differentiates the art from more conventional gallery work. As the image weathers and the two tones of newsprint used in the piece age at different rates, the human and animal forms will separate visually from one another. The tenuous unity here will slowly dissipate. Even when the image is fresh, the nuanced and hand-drawn lines of the human form are contrasted with the stark printed lines of the rooster head. The animal head shows the characteristic printing plate breaks that exist in all Gaia's large linoleum prints. These cracks in unity humanize Gaia's images and shatters any illusion of perfection. It is in these crevices between parts that humanity sees in. It is the space in between that remains of interest. It is impossible to meditate on a flawless wall, Gaia seems to say, it is the flaws that allow us to focus

and see new possibilities that were not obvious at first, and it is in these flaws that human nature, no matter how bizarre, is revealed.



Returning to the question of the missing female figure, we can only assume that she has left the scene or is a surrogate for the artist himself. As the creator, executioner of Holofernes, remixer of nature, the artist is the female energy. With a name like Gaia, the artist in this case entertains large ambitions. His apparition appears like a poem on the streetscape, at once signing a song of loss and care, the rooster seems at the verge of lulling the head of

Holofernes as he emerges from the ground.

In contrast to traditional associations, in contemporary art the disembodied head has different meanings but one of the most famous is by British artist Marc Quinn in his self-portrait “Self” (1991) [*pictured left*], which is created from 10 pints of the artist’s own blood. This form of grotesque self-portraiture also reveals a form of deep narcissism at work. One that feeds off self-referential games and navel gazing. Gaia’s figure looks beyond contemporary idioms, like Quinn’s depiction, to older forms in a form of artistic nostalgia that looks for meaning in myth and legend. In the transience of contemporary culture, Gaia’s search for meaning is a quest for purpose.

“St. John” is placed on the edge of a large wooden space and the empty space in front of him suggests that he has a way to go until his mission, whatever it is, is complete. My instinct tells me he's attempting to return to nature, even if he seems unsure where that exists.

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